



Parliamentary Education Office

fact sheet series



fact sheet series

Table of
Contents

CONTENTS

01 The Coat of Arms	30 The Speaker
02 Despatch Box	31 The Constitution
03 Speaker's Chair	32 Senators
04 The Usher of the Black Rod	33 Double Dissolution
05 Adjournment Debate	34 Federation
06 Amendments	35 Separation of powers
07 Party leadership in the Senate and the House of Representatives	36 Passing a bill
08 Main Committee	37 Frontbenchers and Backbenchers
09 Party Meetings (See 22 Political Parties)	38 Crossing the Floor
10 The Serjeant-at-Arms	39 Question Time
11 The Mace	40 A Day in the Life of a Member of the House of Representatives
12 Coalition (See 22 Political Parties)	41 Elections
13 Prorogation of Parliament and Dissolution of the House of Representatives	42 Estimates
14 Independent Members and Senators	43 Parliament House Facts
15 Leader of the Opposition	44 Hansard
16 The President of the Senate	45 Inside Parliament House
17 Governor-General	46 Joint Sitting of Parliament
18 The House of Representatives	47 Private Members and Senators
19 Cabinet	48 Ministers
20 Members of Parliament in the House of Representatives	49 Parliamentary Committees
21 Ministers and Shadow Ministers	50 Petitions
22 Political Party	51 Preparing a Bill for Parliament
23 The Prime Minister	52 Standing Orders
24 The Media	53 The Budget
25 The Senate	54 The Clerk
26 The Party Whip	55 Three Levels of Government
27 A Day in Parliament	56 Where Bills Come From
28 Bills and Acts	57 Government
29 Functions of Parliament	

THE COAT OF ARMS

The Australian Coat of Arms consists of a shield with the badges of each of the six Australian States. On the left side of the shield stands a red kangaroo and on the right is an emu. Beneath the shield is a scroll with the word 'Australia' written in it. Wattle sprays form a background.

The coat of arms is one of the symbols of Federation. The Commonwealth uses it to identify its authority and property. However, it can also be found in many other places, for example on cricketers' caps and on Australian passports.



The Australian Coat of Arms

DESPATCH BOX

The despatch box is a wooden box decorated with silver and enamel edges with a hinged lid and a lock. Its original purpose was for parliamentarians to carry their documents to the chamber. Ministers and shadow ministers now use them to rest their speeches and documents on when they address the house - that is when they are said to be speaking 'from the despatch box.'

There are two despatch boxes in the House of Representatives. They sit on the centre table next to where the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition sit. They are replicas of two boxes which sat in the House of Commons before they were destroyed by a bomb explosion in 1941 during the Second World War. The despatch box replicas were given to the Australian Parliament in 1927 by King George V on the opening of Parliament House in Canberra.

The boxes now symbolise the link between the British House of Commons and the Australian House of Representatives.



The despatch box is elaborately decorated with silver



The Prime Minister speaking from the despatch box

Photos by AUSPIC

SPEAKER'S CHAIR

The Speaker's Chair is located on a platform at one end of the chamber of the House of Representatives. It is the focus of parliamentary meetings and is placed so that the Speaker can see and hear everything that happens in the chamber.

The Clerks sit just in front of the Speaker so that the Speaker can consult with the Clerks while Parliament is in session.

The body of the chair is made of Australian grey box timber. The marquetry on the back panel is made of Tasmanian black-hearted sassafras and six types of Australian wattle. The chair was made by Canberra craftsman, David Upfill-Brown.



Photo by AUSPIC

Detailed photo of the Speaker's Chair

THE USHER OF THE BLACK ROD

The Usher of the Black Rod is a parliamentary official in the Senate. The Usher of the Black Rod's main responsibility in the chamber is to help the President maintain order and to organise the details of the Senate's operation both within the chamber and throughout the Senate building. At the beginning of each day's session, the Usher of the Black Rod escorts the President into the Senate chamber. The Usher of the Black Rod sits in the chamber at the back of the government seats.

The Usher of the Black Rod has the responsibility in the Department of the Senate to supervise security and provide services that keep the department running, such as office accommodation for senators and Senate staff, printing and publishing Senate business, and organising the payment of senators and Senate staff. On important ceremonial occasions, such as the opening of Parliament, the Usher of the Black Rod dresses in a formal, traditional costume and leads the ceremony while carrying the Black Rod.



Photo by AUSPIC

The Usher of Black Rod in the Senate Chamber

ADJOURNMENT DEBATE

Adjournment means to suspend a meeting until a later time. The Speaker of the House of Representatives usually proposes that 'the House do now adjourn' at 10.30pm on Mondays and Tuesdays, 7.30pm on Wednesdays and 5.30pm on Thursdays. This is a signal that the sitting of the House will end in 30 minutes.

The adjournment debate gives members and senators the opportunity to speak on almost any matter for five minutes. Unlike most other motions, there are no limits to the subject matter. For example, during an adjournment debate in March 2001, the following subjects were raised by members of the House:

- the Family Court in Dandenong, Victoria
- partners of the NSW Veterans Association
- breaching Centrelink provisions
- MRI scanner for the Prince Charles Hospital
- Ashfield Council NSW
- Bank Charges, and
- Centrelink benefits.

Adjournment debates in the Senate are similar. However, the President of the Senate normally proposes that 'the Senate do now adjourn' at 9.50pm on Mondays, 7.40pm on Tuesdays and Wednesdays, and 8.00pm on Thursdays unless there is further business. The Senate adjournment debate lasts for 40 minutes.

AMENDMENTS

An amendment is a change made to an existing Act of Parliament (bill) using a legal procedure. The procedure requires Parliament to vote on each change or amendment.

Bills are amended as they go through Parliament. Existing Acts of Parliament can be changed with an amendment bill.

Amendments to bills usually take place during debates in both Houses. In the House of Representatives, amendments are proposed during the stage called 'consideration in detail' which occurs after the second reading debate and vote.

Any member or senator can move a motion to change any word or clause or paragraph. The motion for an amendment means that a vote is required to either pass or reject (negative) the motion for the amendment. Items can be deleted or inserted. In long and complicated bills, debating and voting on amendments may take many hours, even days, of detailed discussion and debate.

Any member or senator who wants to move an amendment usually submits the amendment to the Clerk, who circulates printed copies to everyone in the chamber, ensuring the details of the amendment are clearly understood. All parties have to decide in advance whether to support or oppose specific amendments.

The government introduces amendment bills to correct faults, omissions and other problems in existing Acts and to update existing Acts. Amendment Acts and bills contain the word amendment in their official title. For example:

*Classification (Publications, Films and Computer Games) Amendment Act
(No. 2) 2004*

PARTY LEADERSHIP IN THE SENATE AND THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Senate

In the Senate, the Leader of the Government and the Leader of the Opposition lead their parties in debating bills. Although these two senators have responsibility for their parties in the Senate, they do not have the same powers as the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition in the House of Representatives.

The Manager of Government Business is a minister appointed by the Prime Minister to make sure that the government's business of bills and other matters proceed through the Senate efficiently. The chief work of the Manager of Government Business is to organise the minute by minute operation of the Senate so that the daily work runs efficiently. The Manager of Government Business works closely with the President of the Senate, as well as the Whips, the Clerks, and senior members of the opposition. They meet daily to arrange the agenda for the day and also during the day's sitting to re-arrange the business of the day. The Manager spends a lot of time in the chamber moving motions which smooth the passage of legislation.

House of Representatives

The Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition lead their parties in the House of Representatives.

The Prime Minister is the head of the government and the leader of Australia. He or she sits in the House of Representatives and is elected by the party or parties which have won most of the seats in this house. He/she is in charge of the cabinet, which is the group of senior ministers who make important decisions about running the country.

The Leader of the Opposition is the head of the Opposition. He or she leads the party or parties which have the second largest number of seats in the House of Representatives.

The Leader of the House is a minister appointed by the Prime Minister to make sure that the government's business of bills and other matters proceed through the House of Representatives efficiently. The chief work of the Leader of the House is to organise the minute by minute operation of the House of Representatives so that the daily work runs efficiently. The Leader of the House works closely with the Speaker, as well as the Whips, Clerks, and senior members of the opposition. They meet daily to arrange the agenda of the day and also during the day's sitting to re-arrange the business of the day. The Leader of the House spends a lot of time in the chamber moving motions which smooth the passage of legislation.

MAIN COMMITTEE

The Main Committee is a second chamber of the House of Representatives.

It is an extension of the House of Representatives and meets usually at the same time as the House on Wednesday and Thursday mornings. The Main Committee chamber is a large room near the House of Representatives and is permanently set up with special furniture to look like a smaller version of the House of Representatives.

The Main Committee exists to give members more time and opportunity to debate bills that are not controversial. Therefore, there are no division votes. Members in the Main Committee spend most of their time debating legislation at the second reading stage. If, at any time, there is a division vote in the House of Representatives, debate in the Main Committee is suspended and members go downstairs to the House to vote.

The chamber can function with a quorum of only three members including the Deputy Speaker or a member of the Speaker's panel. The Deputy Speaker of the House of Representatives or a member of the Speaker's panel chair the Main Committee meetings.

All decisions made in the Main Committee are reported back to the House of Representatives.

THE SERJEANT-AT-ARMS

The Serjeant-at-Arms is a parliamentary official in the House of Representatives. The Serjeant's role is to look after the Speaker and Members of the House of Representatives, giving advice and providing office facilities.

In the chamber the Serjeant-at-Arms carries the Mace and enforces security when Parliament is meeting. Any visitor who tries to interrupt the workings of the Parliament is removed by the Serjeant and other security officers.

For formal ceremonies, the Serjeant-at-Arms wears silver-buckled shoes, stockings, knee-breeches (or skirt), a black coat with a large rosette on the back, waistcoat, stiff shirt front, white lace around the neck and cuffs, white gloves and a ceremonial sword.

At the beginning of each day's sitting, the Serjeant-at-Arms, carrying the Mace, escorts the Speaker into the chamber. The Serjeant also delivers formal messages from the House of Representatives to the Senate.

The Serjeant-at-Arms is also responsible for security, TV broadcasting of the chamber, and bookings for visitors to the House of Representatives.



Photo by AUSPIC

The Serjeant-at-Arms carrying the Mace into the House of Representatives

THE MACE

The Mace is the symbol of the authority of the Speaker of the House of Representatives. At the beginning of the day's sitting in the House of Representatives, the Serjeant-at-Arms carries the Mace into the chamber ahead of the Speaker, and places it on the centre table with the crown pointing to the government's side. The Mace sits on the centre table as long as Parliament is officially meeting and the Speaker or a deputy is present.

The current Mace was made in London, of gilt silver, and weighs about eight kilograms. The head bears a royal crown, a coat of arms, the royal cipher (monogram with the Queen's initials) and emblems of the six states. Also on the head are etchings of fruit, rams' heads and wheat, symbolising the importance of Australia's sheep and agricultural industries.

When not in use, the Mace sits in a glass cabinet in the Speaker's office.



Photo by AUSPIC

The Mace

PREPARING FOR A NEW FEDERAL PARLIAMENT

In Australia, the federal electoral cycle is determined by the Australian Constitution and the Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918. The House of Representatives can meet for a maximum of three years from the opening of the Parliament before its members must face re-election. The Prime Minister chooses the date for a federal election. This could be at any time during the three-year term.

Prorogation of Parliament and Dissolution of the House of Representatives

The Governor-General brings the work of the Parliament to a close by issuing a special proclamation called a prorogation. This is an ancient power of the British Crown adopted in the Australian Parliament as a formal way of closing Parliament. A prorogation may occur at any time, but nowadays is usually used only before an election is called.

The House of Representatives is then dissolved (brought to an end). The dissolution of the House of Representatives triggers the issuing of writs for the election of new members to the House.

Half-Senate elections (to elect half of the 72 state senators plus the four senators representing the two territories) are usually held at the same time as elections for the House of Representatives, though they need not be. See the Elections fact sheet for more information.

The entire Senate is not dissolved, except in the special case of a 'double dissolution' election under section 57 of the Constitution. See the Double Dissolution fact sheet for more information.

Caretaker government

After the Parliament is prorogued, bills and other business before the House of Representatives and the Senate lapse and will need to be reintroduced in the next Parliament. After the House is dissolved, the government becomes a caretaker government and, by convention, does not make major decisions, except in consultation with the opposition. The sittings of the Senate are terminated, but Senate committees may still operate. Parliamentary business can resume once the opening ceremony for the new Parliament has been held.



Photo by AUSPIC

Procession of the new parliament, at the opening ceremony for the 43rd Parliament of Australia

Opening a new Parliament

A new Parliament starts with an opening ceremony with some traditional practices borrowed from the British Parliament. One such practice is that the new Parliament is declared open in the Senate rather than the House of Representatives. This is so the Governor-General can attend and deliver a speech. This tradition dates back to the practice of the British Parliament in which, since the seventeenth century, the monarch has not entered the House of Commons. In Australia, the Governor-General does not enter the House of Representatives.

An important part of the opening ceremony is the swearing-in of all members of the House of Representatives, as well as the four senators elected to represent the two territories. New state senators are sworn in after the following 1 July.

A modern addition to the opening of a new Parliament is an Indigenous 'Welcome to Country' ceremony, which was held for the first time in February 2008 before the opening of the 42nd Parliament.



Photo by AUSPIC

Governor General giving a speech at the Opening of the 43rd Parliament

INDEPENDENT MEMBERS AND SENATORS

'Independents' are members and senators who do not belong to a party.

Independent members and senators usually sit by themselves on the cross benches which are the seats that curve around at the end of the chamber and are furthest from the Speaker or the President.

Independents sometimes vote with the government and sometimes with the opposition. On some occasions they abstain and do not vote at all.

If the government does not have a majority in the Senate, it may need the votes of some or all of the Independents to pass the bill, particularly when non-government senators oppose the bill. Therefore, the government sometimes spends time and effort persuading Independents to support government bills.

Independents can introduce their own bills into Parliament. These are called private members' bills. Independents introduce their own bills so that they can suggest new laws about issues that they think are important and which the government is not addressing. Private members' bills cannot pass without government support and therefore are usually defeated. However, an Independent parliamentarian at least has the satisfaction of raising the issue for public debate.

Independent members and senators are usually elected because they are well known and respected in a community and have a strong personal following.

LEADER OF THE OPPOSITION

The Leader of the Opposition is a member of Parliament in the House of Representatives and leader of the minority party. In the House of Representatives, the Leader of the Opposition sits at the centre table in front of the Opposition and opposite the Prime Minister. All the members in the party elect the leader.

The tasks of the Leader of the Opposition include:

- chairing the weekly party meeting
- helping to develop party policy
- selecting other members and senators in the same party to be shadow ministers
- leading the team of shadow ministers which is called the shadow cabinet
- acting as the chief spokesperson for the party inside and outside Parliament
- presenting different policies to the government, and
- leading the party in an election

The Leader of the Opposition is often seen as the alternative Prime Minister. The party can vote out the Leader of the Opposition and vote in a different member of Parliament at any time.



Photo by AUSPIC

Seating locations in the House of Representatives

THE PRESIDENT OF THE SENATE

The President is in charge of the sittings of the Senate, like a chairperson running a meeting. The President makes sure that debates run smoothly, and the rules of the Senate, as set out in Standing Orders, are followed. There is also an elected Deputy President.

The President is the spokesperson for the Senate in all its dealings with the Governor-General, the government, the House of Representatives and other parliaments and authorities.

The President is one of 76 Senators. All the Senators elect the new President using a secret vote on the first sitting day after 1 July following a Senate election.

The President has a vote just like any other senator and votes whenever other senators vote. This is to ensure that all states have equal representation whenever votes are taken.

The President is also in charge of the entire Department of the Senate and is responsible for budgets, staffing and even such details as allocation of offices to senators.

The President of the Senate has a similar role to the Speaker of the House of Representatives. Both are Presiding Officers of the Parliament. The President is addressed as Mr or Madam President.



The location of the President in the Senate

GOVERNOR-GENERAL

The Governor-General is the Queen's representative in Australia, and is appointed by the Crown (the Queen) on the advice of the Australian Prime Minister. The appointment is usually for five years. The Governor-General has some of the responsibility for ensuring that Australia is governed according to the rules set out in the Constitution.

The Constitution describes some specific tasks for the Governor-General. A major task is to give Royal Assent to bills that Parliament has recently passed. Royal Assent is when the Governor-General signs a new bill, and it becomes a law for Australia. Another occasion when the Governor-General uses constitutional power is when he or she opens the new Parliament after an election.



The Governor-General engaging in official duties

The Governor-General also uses constitutional power when the Prime Minister requests the Governor-General to dissolve Parliament and start the process for an election. The Governor-General usually agrees to do so.

When official visitors such as presidents and monarchs from foreign countries visit Australia, they are met and welcomed by the Governor-General. The Governor-General often invites famous Australians and official visitors to visit the official residence in Yarralumla, Canberra.

The Governor-General frequently travels throughout Australia meeting people, opening events and making speeches. Sometimes the Governor-General travels overseas to represent Australia internationally, but does not have the authority to make decisions on behalf of the government.

Whenever the Governor-General makes a public statement, he or she avoids personal opinions and does not comment on political and other controversies.

The first Australian-born Governor-General was Sir Isaac Issacs (1931–1936).

The current Governor-General of Australia is Ms Quentin Bryce. She is the first female Governor-General of Australia.

THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

The Australian Parliament consists of three elements:

- 1) the Queen, who is represented in Australia by the Governor-General
- 2) the House of Representatives, and
- 3) the Senate.

The Parliament is bicameral, which means there are two houses, and a bill has to pass with a majority vote in both houses to create a new law.

The House of Representatives is also known as the 'lower house.' Although its name is derived from the United States Congress, it is based on the British House of Commons, even to the point of using the colour green in its furnishings and symbols.

The 150 members are elected for three years, each representing an electorate of about 150,000 people, of whom approximately 94,000 are eligible to vote.

The seating plan for members and parliamentary officials follows the traditional British pattern. The Speaker presides from a large Speaker's Chair, the government members sit on the Speaker's right and the members of the opposition sit to the Speaker's left. The Clerk and deputy Clerks sit in front of the Speaker at the centre table.

The leader of the government (Prime Minister) and the opposition (Leader of the Opposition) also sit at the centre table. Government ministers and opposition shadow ministers sit on a long bench seat in the front row on their respective sides. The backbenchers who sit behind each have their own seat and desk.



Photo by AUSPIC

The House of Representatives

The government is formed by the party (or coalition of parties) with the majority of members in the House of Representatives. This is done to guarantee the passing of bills, especially money bills, which are needed to keep the government and the country functioning. The party or parties that are not in the government may form the opposition and may choose to vote with or against the government on any issue. The Speaker runs the proceedings of the House using the rules set out in Standing Orders. Most time is spent debating and voting on legislation. Members also scrutinise the work of the government in Question Time. Members represent their party and the people in their electorates when they speak during adjournment, grievance and matters of public importance debates.

The House of Representatives is always open to the media and the public who are free to enter and leave the chamber as they wish, although free ticket bookings are usually necessary to attend Question Time each day at 2pm.

CABINET

Cabinet is a committee of government ministers chaired by the Prime Minister. It is the main decision making body of the executive government. The ministry includes about thirty members and senators. Cabinet includes about seventeen senior ministers. Only cabinet ministers attend cabinet meetings unless there is a specific matter that requires the presence of junior ministers. All cabinet discussions and decisions are secret although records of cabinet meetings are opened to the public after thirty years.

In cabinet meetings, ministers introduce proposals for new bills from their departments. The cabinet discusses proposals for new bills — especially the costs — and recommends to the minister whether a bill should proceed or further changes should be made. Sometimes the cabinet sets up a sub-committee of ministers to examine an issue in greater detail. Cabinet spends a lot of time discussing current national problems and how they can be solved through legislation or other means such as regulations.

Cabinet makes decisions in different ways depending on how the Prime Minister chairs the meeting. Some Prime Ministers use a democratic vote to decide an issue. Other Prime Ministers prefer to try and reach a consensus decision.

The Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet provides all the technical, legal and other expert advice for the Cabinet to operate effectively.

Cabinet usually meets in the Cabinet room in Parliament House on Mondays, although it may meet at any other time if there is a lot of business. Sometimes the cabinet meets in other locations, especially in Sydney and Melbourne.

Cabinet is accountable to Parliament for the running of the government. The Parliament scrutinises the ministers and the government during Question Time each day in both chambers, as well as twice a year in estimates committees.

The Cabinet Room is located on the ground floor in Parliament House opposite the Prime Minister's office and close to the offices of the other ministers. The room is highly secure and is regularly swept electronically, and mobile phones, computers and other electronic devices cannot be used. High security is essential because the cabinet discusses confidential and secret matters that affect the life and well-being of the nation.



Photo by AUSPIC

The Cabinet in the Cabinet Room

MEMBERS OF PARLIAMENT IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

A person who is elected to the House of Representatives is called a Member of Parliament – MP for short. Members are not referred to by name in the House but by the name of their electorate; for example, the Member for Newcastle.

Members are elected for three years. The longest serving member in the House of Representatives was The Right Honourable W. M. Hughes who was an MP from 1901 to 1951.

Each member represents an electorate that has, on average, about 150,000 people and approximately 94,000 voters. There are 150 electorates and 150 members.

Members spend most of their time helping people in their electorate. People seek assistance from their federal Member of Parliament when they are having difficulties with such issues as taxes, immigration, health and pensions. Members may also represent many community groups such as unions, pensioner associations and sporting bodies.

Members are paid about \$100,000 a year. They also receive additional payments to help them run their electorate offices. Members in very large electorates such as Kalgoorlie in Western Australia and Grey in South Australia receive additional allowances to cover such things as chartering aircraft for travel throughout their vast electorates.

In the House, members often refer to each other as the Honourable Member. Members may use the formal title Honourable (abbreviated to Hon) if they are or have been a minister.

How to address a Member of the House of Representatives:

- Mr John Smith MP
- The Hon Jane Macarthur MP
- The Hon Richard Thorpe MP, Member for Greenhills

MINISTERS AND SHADOW MINISTERS

Ministers

Ministers are Members of Parliament who are given additional responsibility by the Prime Minister. The Prime Minister chooses experienced and knowledgeable parliamentarians from the same party or party coalition. All the ministers work together as the government. Senior government ministers meet each week in Cabinet to consider ideas for new laws and solutions to solve current problems.

Each minister is in charge of a department such as the Department of Defence. Ministers work with their department and with other community organisations, and professional associations to prepare new laws and change old laws which need updating or improving. When a minister introduces a bill for a new law into the Parliament, he or she must explain to the Parliament why the law is necessary and how it will solve a particular problem. As soon as the bill becomes law, the minister and the department are responsible for implementing it throughout Australia.

All ministers must be able to stand up in Parliament each day at 2 pm during Question Time and answer questions from other members and senators about their departments and how the government is running Australia. Ministers in the government are responsible to the Parliament, and any members and senators can examine, scrutinise and criticise the work of the government through the work of each minister.

There are about 20 ministers in the House of Representatives and about 10 in the Senate.

Shadow Ministers

Shadow ministers are members and senators who belong to the opposition party. Although they have no power, they have a responsibility to scrutinise the work of the government and of individual ministers.

The Leader of the Opposition in the House of Representatives appoints senior members of his or her parliamentary party as shadow ministers who, like government ministers, concentrate on the work of particular departments such as Defence. Senior shadow ministers form a shadow cabinet which meets regularly and discusses opposition policy on current issues. Shadow ministers also explain to the Parliament what the opposition would do about specific problems if the opposition were the government.

If there is a change of government after an election the shadow ministers all expect to become ministers.

POLITICAL PARTY

A political party is an organisation that works to represent groups of people and ideas. They aim to have members elected to Parliament so their ideas can impact the way Australia is governed.

The two biggest parties in Australia are the Australian Labor Party and the Liberal Party of Australia. Smaller parties, also called 'minor parties', include the Nationals, the Australian Greens, the Country Liberal Party and the Family First Party.

Political parties have branches around Australia. Party members in each branch suggest ideas for party policies. They help choose or pre-select party candidates for local, state and federal elections. They also assist with election campaigns, distribute 'how to vote' cards on Election Day, and help scrutinise the counting of votes.

Before a political party can enter a candidate in an election they must officially register with the Australian Electoral Commission. They also have to meet certain criteria under the Electoral Act, which includes having at least 500 members (who are eligible to be on the electoral roll) and having a written constitution.

Parliamentary parties

A political party becomes a parliamentary party when it has party members elected to a parliament at a federal, state or territory level, or elected to local council.

Parliamentary parties are powerful because their members work as a team and generally vote the same way on issues before the parliament. Members of parliament within a party are assigned specific tasks so that the work can be divided and particular people can focus on specific issues of importance. Parties also employ specialist research and administrative staff to assist members of parliament in developing policy.

Coalitions

A coalition is the joining together of two or more parliamentary parties. Parliamentary parties that do not have enough members to form a government or opposition by themselves may form a coalition to gain greater power by having more support in the chamber.

In the federal Parliament, a coalition that forms government may choose several ways of working together. For example:

- the Prime Minister may be drawn from the larger party
- the Deputy Prime Minister may be drawn from the smaller party
- ministries may be shared between the two parties according to the ratio of seats held by the two parties.

Coalition members usually sit in the House of Representatives and the Senate in adjacent groups. The members of a coalition generally vote the same way, although they may have different ideas on particular bills. Each party in a coalition usually holds separate party meetings.

The Liberal Party of Australia and the Nationals have formed the longest-running coalition in the federal Parliament. These two parties ran coalition governments in the three periods 1949–1972, 1975–1983 and 1996–2007.

continued overleaf...

Minor parties

Minor parties may form part of the government or the opposition through a coalition or agreement with another party. If this is not the case, minor party members sit on the 'cross benches' in the chambers, together with any Independents.

Sometimes minor parties can hold what is called the 'balance of power'. This means that their vote may decide the outcome of an issue if the government and opposition are in disagreement.

Party meetings

During sitting weeks, each parliamentary party has a party meeting. The meeting is held in a designated party room, and is chaired by the leader of the party. Party meetings generally only involve members of the parliamentary party and their proceedings are confidential.

The main purpose of party meetings is to decide how the party will work as a team to make an impact on the floor of the Parliament. In party meetings, members of parliament may:

- elect office holders such as the party leader, ministers, party spokespersons and the Whips
- debate and make decisions about party policy
- discuss tactics and organise party members to speak on particular bills
- resolve potential conflict and differences of opinion to ensure that the party displays a united front.

Outside the Parliament, political parties also hold meetings, referred to as branch meetings. These meetings are generally open to all members of the party, as well as those members of the public interested in becoming involved.

History

In the first decade after Federation (1901), the major parties in the federal Parliament were the Free Trade Party, the Protectionist Party and the Australian Labor Party. The Australian Labor Party is the oldest Australian political party and was formed by the trade union movement in the 1890s.

THE PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister is a member of Parliament in the House of Representatives. He or she is also the leader of the majority political party in the House. In the House of Representatives, the Prime Minister sits at the centre table in front of the government.

The Prime Minister is the most powerful person in Parliament and has many tasks. These include:

- chairing the weekly party meeting in which the party decides policy and examines new legislation
- selecting other members and senators from the same party to be ministers
- deciding with the ministers in Cabinet what new laws should be introduced into Parliament
- leading the government as the chief government spokesperson in the House of Representatives
- representing the Australian government overseas
- advising the Governor-General about important appointments such as the appointment of ambassadors, heads of government departments and other constitutional matters, and
- deciding when to call an election and leading the party in the election.

The Prime Minister also has a major influence on party policies and how the government runs the country because of his or her power and experience.

At any time, the party can vote the Prime Minister out and replace him or her with another government member of Parliament. After this happens, the Prime Minister reverts to being a backbencher.



Photo by AUSPIC

The Hon Julia Gillard MP,
Prime Minister of Australia

THE MEDIA

The media consists of people who work for newspaper, television, radio and other organisations that collect and publish information.

In both the House of Representatives and the Senate, there are special seats reserved for journalists. These are located above and behind the Speaker and the President where the journalists can see and hear everything that is happening. Journalists sit in these galleries and take notes, especially during Question Time. They also watch the proceedings on television in their offices so that they can copy video clips for news programs.

Press Gallery offices and studios are on the second floor of the Senate side of Parliament House. In this area, there are television and radio studios for the ABC, SBS and the commercial television stations. There are also offices for all the major newspapers such as The Australian, The Age, The West Australian and the Sydney Morning Herald.

The main work of journalists is to select information and stories about what happens in Parliament and to present the information in such a way that everyone in Australia is aware of what Parliament and the government are doing. Each day, journalists prepare stories about what happens in Parliament (especially about events in Question Time), policies and decisions of the government and opposition, and particular people such as ministers and shadow ministers.

Members and senators depend on the media to inform people throughout Australia and the wider world about what is happening in the Parliament. For example, a senator from Tasmania can inform people in his or her state about an issue by briefing a journalist from The Mercury in Hobart to write a story about what that senator is doing in the Senate. Ministers and shadow ministers like to be interviewed on television from the Parliament House studios so that they can explain what they are doing in Parliament.



Photo by AUSPIC

A press conference

The journalists are quite powerful because they decide which members and senators they will interview and publicise. They decide the content of each story. Although members and senators do not like journalists writing critical stories about them, journalists and media organisations are free to select the news and write what they think to be the important and interesting stories. In this way, the media exercise a very important scrutinising role in the Parliament.

THE SENATE

The Australian Parliament consists of three elements: the Queen, who is represented in Australia by the Governor-General, the House of Representatives, and the Senate. The Parliament is bicameral, that is, there are two houses and a bill has to pass with a majority vote in both houses to create a new law. Both the House of Representatives and the Senate have their own chambers designed and constructed to meet the specific needs of each.

The Senate is also known as the 'upper house'. The tradition of decorating the upper house in red has followed the British tradition in the House of Lords and of the Australian state parliaments. However, the Senate upper house uses a modified red colour reflecting the colour of Australian desert sand and rock rather than the traditional rich dark reds of England.

The name Senate is derived from the United States Congress, and like that chamber, consists of Senators who represent each state and territory in the federation. The 76 Senators include 12 Senators representing each of the six states and two senators representing each of the two territories.

The seating plan for senators and parliamentary officials is similar to the House of Representatives. The President presides from a large chair at the western end of the chamber. Government senators sit to the President's right and the members of the opposition sit to the President's left.

The Clerk and one of the deputy Clerks sit in front of the President at the centre table. The Clerk and deputy Clerk records the main decisions and actions of the Senate. The Usher of the Black Rod carries the Black Rod into and out of the chamber at the start and conclusion of the day's proceedings.



Photo by AUSPIC

The Senate Chamber

At the centre table also sit the Leader of the Government in the Senate and the Leader of the Opposition in the Senate. Government ministers and opposition shadow ministers sit behind their desk in the front row on their respective sides. The backbenchers who sit behind, like the ministers and shadow ministers, have their own seat and desk.

The Senate is always open to the press and the public who are free to enter and leave the chamber as they wish.

THE PARTY WHIP

The Whip is a member of parliament or a senator who is also a party official and works for the members of the same political party. The Whip is like a team manager and coach who organises the minute by minute activities of party members in the Parliament.

The word comes from the sport of fox hunting in England. The Whip was the person who whipped all the hounds into a pack and pointed them in the right direction to chase the fox!

The Whip has so many tasks that the major parties have a Chief Whip and two other Whips.

On days when the Parliament sits, Whips from the major parties meet and plan the day's agenda and sort out procedural and other details. The Whips also negotiate 'pairs' from opposite parties so that the numbers between the Government and Opposition are kept in balance if individual members and senators are absent.

The Whip also organises lists of party members who wish to speak on specific bills and motions and passes the list to the Speaker or President before the debate begins. When there is a Division vote in the chamber, the Whip makes sure that all party members turn up to vote. The Whips from the major parties count the votes in a division.

When individual members and senators have personal problems such as serious illness, they seek the advice and support of the party Whip.

Whips supervise the minute by minute operations of the Parliament to make sure that party decisions are implemented through correct voting, orderly speech-making and by using the Standing Orders or rules of the chamber.

Whips are selected from the members and senators. They are usually experienced members of the party who enjoy the respect and confidence of colleagues. Different parties have different methods of appointing Whips.

Whips are quite visible as they move around the chamber speaking to colleagues, organising the business of the party and making last minute decisions with the Clerks, the Speaker or the President.

Usually, the Whips sit where they can be easily accessible to other party members. In the House of Representatives, the Whips sit in the back row behind the party where they can see who is present and what is happening among party members. In the Senate, the Whips sit at the President's end of the rows of seats where they can confer with party advisors, the Clerks and each other.

A DAY IN PARLIAMENT

Parliament usually meets for two consecutive weeks each month except January and July. In a sitting week, both the House of Representatives and the Senate usually sit from Monday to Thursday. The outline below is based on the House of Representatives timetable for Wednesdays and Thursdays. The daily routine of business in the Senate is very similar.

9 am

Prayers followed by government business. This includes ministers introducing new bills, and members debating and voting on bills. Members sit in the House if they are about to deliver a speech, if they are interested in the bill or if requested by the Whip to make up a quorum of numbers. Speeches usually last 20 minutes.

2 pm

Question Time. Members ask questions of ministers. All members must attend.

3 pm (approx)

The opposition may ask for a special debate on a current issue. This debate is called a Matter of Public Importance.

4 pm

Government business. The debate on new bills from the morning continues.

7.30 pm

Adjournment debate. During the last 30 minutes, members make five minute speeches about any matter, especially about issues in their electorate.

On Mondays and Tuesdays, the debates on government business continue until 10.30pm and are then followed by the adjournment debate. On Wednesday and Thursday mornings, the House of Representatives runs a second chamber where members debate bills and motions that are not controversial. There are more opportunities for members to take part when there are two houses debating.

On Mondays in the House of Representatives there is a time when any member can introduce their own bill, called a private member's bill. At various times during the week, the Parliament is required to vote on many things such as government decisions about starting inquiries, changing the agenda for the day and reports from government departments.

The details of the daily program are set out in 'Standing Orders' or the rule books for both chambers. It is the responsibility of the presiding officers (the Speaker and the President) working with the Clerks in both houses to make sure that standing orders are followed so that Parliament deals with all its business legally and accurately. The Whips of each party work closely with the Clerks, senior members and senators, and the presiding officers to keep the business of the Parliament running smoothly.

BILLS AND ACTS

One of the major tasks of Parliament is to create laws. A proposed law is called a bill. The word bill probably comes from the Latin word *bull* or seal, and refers to the seal on documents written by a king or person in authority. During the 16th century in England, the word bill came to mean a draft for an Act of Parliament.

The main parts of a bill are:

- The title which refers to the content and the year of the bill. eg. *The Broadcasting Services Act 1999*. If several bills about the same subject and with the same title are passed in the same year, they each have a number eg. *The Broadcasting Services Act 1999 (No.2)*.
- The bill always states the date on which the Act will begin.
- Sometimes there is a list of definitions at the beginning of the bill.
- The main part of the bill is divided into clauses, subclauses and paragraphs.
- The schedule is a section of the bill that contains lists or complicated details. The schedule is like an appendix.

All bills have a statement about the legal source of the bill. The main source for bills in the Australian Parliament is the Constitution, especially Section 51, which lists the powers of the Commonwealth Parliament.

A bill becomes an Act of Parliament after it has been passed by both the House of Representatives and the Senate, and signed by the Governor-General or given Royal Assent.

FUNCTIONS OF PARLIAMENT

Parliament has four main functions: legislation (making laws), representation (acting on behalf of voters and citizens), scrutiny (examining the government), and formation of government.

Legislation

The most important thing Parliament does is to make new laws and change or improve old ones. Most laws are written by government departments and introduced into the Parliament by government ministers. Each year, Parliament passes about 220 bills which become Acts of Parliament once they are signed by the Governor-General. The House of Representatives spends about half its time debating legislation.

Representation

All members of Parliament are elected. Each one of the 150 members of the House of Representatives (MPs) is elected by about 85,000 voters in each electorate. MPs reflect the interests of their electorates when they make speeches. They also assist people in their electorate to solve problems about such things as pensions, migration and taxation. Senators represent states. Each state is represented by 12 senators while each territory has two senators.

Scrutiny

The government or executive implements the laws and other decisions of the Parliament. However, the Parliament likes to check or scrutinise what the government does, especially how the government spends money. The opposition plays an important part in the scrutiny activities of Parliament.

The role of members and senators is to:

- set up parliamentary committees to examine government bills
- investigate how the government spends money in the budget by participating in estimates committees, which are held twice a year
- question the government each day in Question Time in both the House of Representatives and the Senate

Formation of government

The government consists of members of the political party that wins an election and has the majority of members in the House of Representatives. This party and/or its leader (the Prime Minister) select fellow parliamentarians to be the ministers who run departments such as the Department of Foreign Affairs. All ministers are members of Parliament and are therefore elected.

Although the government is formed in the House of Representatives, some ministers are senators. About two thirds of ministers are members of the House of Representatives, and about one third are senators.

THE SPEAKER

The Speaker runs the House of Representatives like a chairperson runs a meeting. The Speaker uses the rules of the House — the standing orders — which are determined by the members of the House.

The Speaker is also the spokesperson for the House of Representatives in its dealings with the Government, the Senate, the Governor-General and other parliaments.

At the beginning of each new Parliament, after a general election, the members' first task is to choose a new Speaker. The Speaker is selected from among the 150 elected members of the House of Representatives. If there is more than one candidate, members use a secret vote to choose someone who usually has a long parliamentary experience. The government candidate usually wins the speakership.

The House also elects a Deputy Speaker at the same time, and the major parties nominate a panel of Acting Deputy Speakers to share the load of chairing the House throughout the day.

The Speaker does not usually take part in debates. Even though the Speaker is usually a member of the government party, he or she must be seen to be impartial and not take sides. If the votes are equal, the Speaker uses a casting vote to break the deadlock but otherwise does not vote.

The office of Speaker is an ancient one dating back to 13th century England. In early English parliaments the Speaker informed the monarch about the decisions of the Parliament.

The Mace is the symbol of the Speaker and is placed on the centre table whenever the Speaker or the Deputy is in the chair and the House of Representatives is meeting officially.

The Speaker has a similar role to the President of the Senate. Both are Presiding Officers of the Parliament.



Photo by AUSPIC

The Speaker and the Clerk

THE CONSTITUTION

The Australian Constitution is the set of legal principles by which Australia is governed. It describes how the Parliament is composed, how Parliament works, lists the powers of the Parliament, defines how federal and state Parliaments share power, refers to the role of the High Court and many other things.

Before 1901, Australia consisted of six separate colonies ruled by the British parliament and government. Many Australian colonists wanted their colonies to unite into one federation. During the 1890s, a series of public meetings, called conventions, were organised throughout the six colonies to decide the shape of a new federal Constitution. Some of the people who ran these meetings wrote a Constitution which was voted on by citizens in each colony.

After the colonial citizens had voted in favour of the new Constitution, it was passed as a British Act of Parliament in 1900 and came into force on 1 January 1901.

The Constitution is divided into 128 Sections. Although many sections appear to be simple, they have lead to different interpretations and legal arguments over the last century. Section 51 has turned out to be particularly significant because it lists the areas in which the Commonwealth Parliament can make laws. These areas include taxes, defence, trade and commerce with other countries, marriage and divorce, immigration, postal services, invalid and old-age pensions, among other things. Another important Section is 109, which states that if the Commonwealth and a state Parliament both pass laws on the same subject, the Commonwealth law over-rules the state law.

Surprisingly, the Constitution does not mention the Prime Minister or the Cabinet, both of which are central to the working of government and the Parliament. For these and other reasons, some people say that the Constitution is out of date and that constitutional reform is needed.

The Constitution may only be changed by a referendum. In a referendum, each eligible Australian over the age of 18 votes on a specified change to the Constitution. A referendum is only passed if it is approved by a majority of voters in a majority of states, and by a majority of voters across the nation as a whole. Since 1901 of 44 proposed changes to the Constitution only eight have been passed.

All Acts of Parliament must conform to the requirements of the Constitution. If citizens believe that an Act of Parliament is unconstitutional, they can take the Australian government to the High Court of Australia, which is responsible for making legal judgments about any matter relating to the Constitution.

SENATORS

A senator is a person who is elected to the Commonwealth Parliament to represent a state or territory. There are 76 senators, 12 from each state and two each from the Northern Territory and the Australian Capital Territory. The voters in each state and territory vote as one electorate in order to elect their senators.

To be elected to the House of Representatives or the Senate, a person must be aged 18 years or over, and be entitled to vote in Commonwealth elections. A candidate must also be an Australian citizen.

State senators are elected for a period of six years. A system of rotation ensures that half the state senators retire every three years. By contrast, the four senators who represent the Australian Capital Territory and the Northern Territory are elected for a period of three years at the same time as the members of the House of Representatives and half of the Senate. The *Senate (Representation of Territories) Act 1973* enabled senators to be elected from the two territories. All senators can stand for re-election.

Sometimes there is a special election called a double dissolution, where all the senators retire, together with all members of the House of Representatives, and the entire Senate is newly elected.

Senators spend most of their time working on major issues that are important to their party, their state or territory and to Australia as a whole. Since most senators are elected for six years, they have time to build up knowledge and expertise on specific areas such as trade, defence and taxation. When senators are at Parliament House, they spend up to seventy percent of their time in senate committees, which scrutinise proposed legislation and related issues. Senators frequently travel throughout Australia as members of these committees, collecting information from various community groups and individual citizens. Senators use this expert knowledge when they scrutinise bills and propose amendments to bills.

Most senators belong to a political party such as the Liberal Party of Australia or the Australian Labor Party. There are usually a number of senators from smaller parties or groups such as the Nationals, the Australian Greens, the Australian Democrats and the Family First Party. The number of parties in the Senate is usually greater than in the House of Representatives, which often means that a government with a majority of members in the House of Representatives does not have a majority in the Senate.

How to address a Senator:

- Senator Williams
- Senator Joanna Smith
- Senator the Hon Richard Thorpe

DOUBLE DISSOLUTION

A double dissolution is the shutting down or dissolution of both houses of Parliament and the calling of an election for all members and senators. The Governor-General calls a double dissolution at the request of the Prime Minister.

The Constitution says that the two Houses of Parliament have almost identical powers. The people who wrote the Constitution therefore saw the possibility of a deadlock between the two Houses in which the Senate will not pass what the House of Representatives wants. Section 57 of the Constitution describes how such a disagreement can be resolved; by dissolving both houses of Parliament and calling an election to let the voters decide how to end the deadlock.

Section 57 of the Constitution states that the Governor-General can dissolve both Houses of Parliament, provided that the following have occurred:

1. the House of Representatives passes a bill;
2. the Senate rejects, fails to pass or passes the bill with amendments to which the House will not agree;
3. three months elapse from the time the Senate disagrees with or fails to pass the bill;
4. the House of Representatives again passes the bill, and
5. the Senate again rejects, fails to pass or passes the bill with amendments to which the House will not agree.

Once these conditions (these are called triggers for a double dissolution) have been met, the Prime Minister may recommend to the Governor-General that a double dissolution of the Parliament takes place. A general election then takes place.

After a double dissolution, the bill is presented to both houses again. If a deadlock occurs once more, then the Governor-General can order a joint sitting of both Houses of Parliament in which all Members and Senators vote together on the legislation concerned. Such a joint sitting has happened only once (6–7 August 1974).

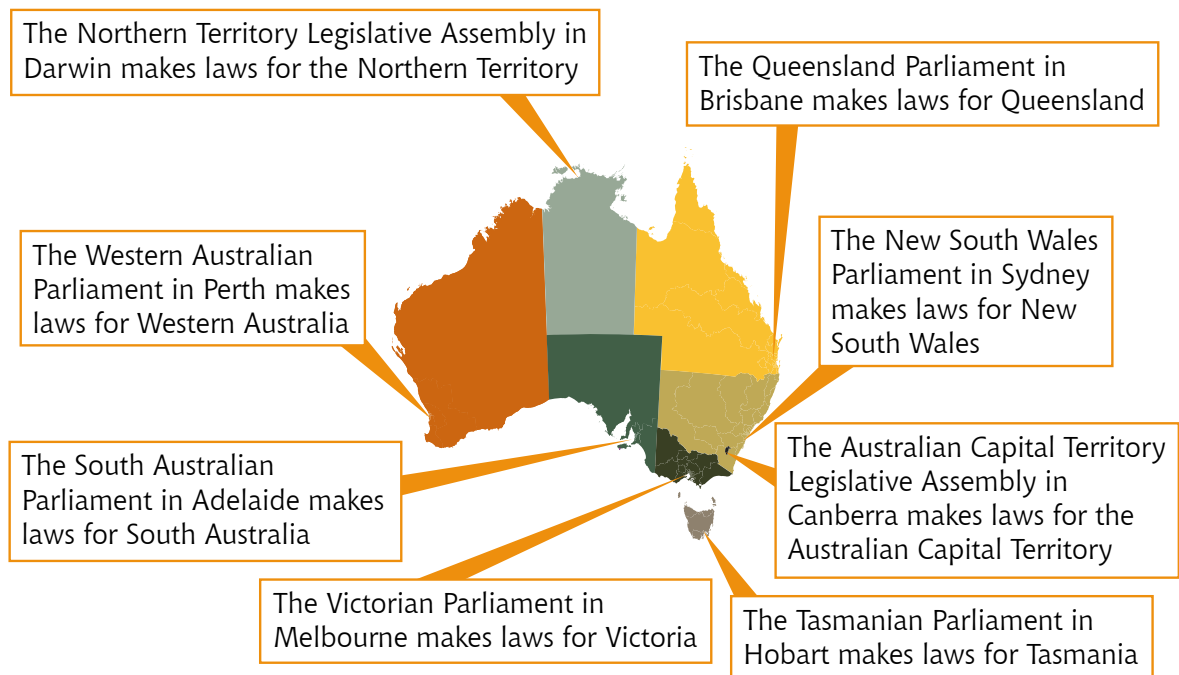
A double dissolution is the only time that all Senators go to an election at the same time.

There have been six double dissolutions of the Australian Parliament: 1914, 1951, 1974, 1975, 1983, and 1987.

FEDERATION

Before 1901, Australia was one continent with six colonies (South Australia governed the Northern Territory). In 1901, these six colonies became states and transferred some of their power to the Commonwealth Government according to the new Constitution of Australia.

In 1911, the Commonwealth Government created the Northern Territory and the Australian Capital Territory. They are not states.



All nine parliaments have the power to collect and spend taxes. However, the Commonwealth collects more taxes than any other government and returns much of this tax money to each state and territory.

Other federations include the United States, Canada, Malaysia, Brazil, Germany and India.

SEPARATION OF POWERS

In Australia, the power to make and manage federal law is divided between three groups: the Parliament, the Executive and the Judiciary. This division is known as 'separation of powers' and is an important principle in Australia's system of governance.

History has shown that checks on the use of power, such as this, are important for preventing misuse of power. Separation of powers avoids a monopoly of power by any one group. Each group works within its area of responsibility and also keeps a check on the actions of the other groups.

The following table shows the role of each arm of governance and their composition:

Power	Role	Composition
Parliament	The Parliament makes and amends the law	The Parliament (also referred to as the Legislature) is made up of the Queen (represented by the Governor-General), the Senate and the House of Representatives
Executive	The Executive puts the law into action	The Executive is made up of the Prime Minister and ministers
Judiciary	The Judiciary makes judgements about the law	The Judiciary is made up of the High Court and other federal courts

Responsible government

In Australia separation of powers works together with another principle known as responsible government, to guide the way law is made and managed. The implementation of separation of powers is not exact in Australia because the Parliament, the Executive and the Judiciary are not entirely separate. For example, members of the Executive are selected from the Parliament and High Court judges are officially appointed by the Governor-General, who is a part of the Parliament.

'Responsible government' means that a party or coalition must maintain the support of the majority of members of the House of Representatives in order to remain in government. This provides another check on the Executive, ensuring they remain accountable to the Parliament and do not abuse their power.

History

The origins of the principle of the separation of powers can be traced as far back as ancient Greece. It was however made popular by the French philosopher Charles de Montesquieu in 1748 in his work *L'Esprit des Lois* (the Spirit of the Laws). He wrote that a nation's freedom depended on the three powers of governance—legislative, executive and judicial—each having their own separate institution. This principle has been widely used in the development of many democracies since that time.

PASSING A BILL

A bill is a proposal for a new law.

Parliament turns a bill into a law or Act of Parliament by voting the bill through the following stages:



FRONTBENCHERS AND BACKBENCHERS

Benches are the seats that members and senators sit on in the House of Representatives and the Senate.

Ministers and shadow ministers sit in the front row while everyone else (ordinary members and senators) sits behind in all the other rows.

The term 'frontbenchers' refers to people who are more senior and influential because they are ministers and shadow ministers. Backbenchers are more often less senior and may one day be promoted to the front bench.

A member who is promoted to minister or shadow minister moves to the front bench. If a member or senator loses his or her position as minister or shadow minister, they move from the front to the back bench.



Photo by AUSPIC

Frontbenchers & Backbenchers in the House of Representatives

CROSSING THE FLOOR

When members and senators vote in Parliament, they nearly always vote with their party. Political parties demand loyalty from their members. On rare occasions however, members and senators may choose not to vote with their party. They can abstain (not turn up) from voting or they can show their public disagreement by crossing the floor and sitting with the other side.

When there is a division vote, in which members and senators have their vote formally recorded, those voting in favour of a motion sit to the right of the Speaker or President, and those voting against, sit to the left. The votes are counted by tallying up the number of members and senators sitting on each side.

A member or senator 'crosses the floor' if they walk across the chamber and vote with the other side. Crossing the floor is a public act made in full view of all the other members of the House, the media and the public. It is meant to make a statement. Party members may consider anyone who crosses the floor to be a traitor.

Members and senators rarely cross the floor. Even if a couple of members cross the floor, it makes little difference to the vote because the government usually still has a majority of members. Crossing the floor can only make a difference when enough parliamentarians change the numbers on each side, or when a government has a majority of only one or two votes (as in the case of the Legislative Council in the South Australian parliament in 1998); then parties' leaders are vigilant about how their members vote.

QUESTION TIME

In Question Time, members and senators (the legislature) question and scrutinise the Prime Minister and ministers in the government (the executive). Question Time is at 2.00 pm every Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday when Parliament is sitting, and lasts for about one hour. Question Time occurs in both the House of Representatives and the Senate.

This photo shows Question Time in the House of Representatives and explains how the opposition and the government take it in turns to ask questions of ministers. Senate question time is very similar.



Photo by AUSPIC

FIRST
An opposition member asks a question of a minister

SECOND
The minister answers the opposition member

THIRD
A government member asks a question of a minister

FOURTH
The minister answers the government member

Members address questions without notice to particular ministers. Ministers do not know the questions that opposition members are going to ask, but they do know in advance the questions from their own party. They have time to prepare their answers. Questions alternate between government and opposition members. Questions are usually about what the government is doing and current issues. Often questions refer to reports in the media. Government and opposition members ask different types of questions. The focus of Question Time is on the executive government. The executive is scrutinised about how it is running government and the nation.

A DAY IN THE LIFE OF A MEMBER OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Fictional extracts from a member's journal.

Morning

7.15 am I arrive at Parliament House and make a brief statement to television journalists at the entrance to Parliament House.

7.30 am Off to the gym, watch TV news as I work out.

8.15 am Have breakfast with friends from the same party to review the main political stories in the newspapers. Then I have a brief meeting with my three office staff and plan the day.

8.55 am I walk down the corridor to the House of Representatives and attend the opening of the Parliament and prayers.

9.05 am I stay in the House to listen to a minister introduce a new bill that I am interested in.

9.30 am There is a stack of emails from people in the electorate, so I answer as many as possible.

10.30 am Yesterday, my research assistant and I wrote a speech, so I check the details and then make the twenty minute speech in the House.

11.00 am A journalist from the press gallery rings to ask me about something I said in the speech.

11.25 am Someone phones from my electorate and complains that they haven't received their tax refund cheque. I ring the Treasurer's office and check, then ask my secretary to call and tell the person the result.

Afternoon

12.15 pm Time for a short lunch in the staff canteen with a group of visitors from the electorate who are going to watch Question Time. They worked for me on election day so I appreciate their visit to Canberra.

2.00 pm All members have to go and sit in the House for Question Time.

3.15 pm It's gossip time with some parliamentary colleagues. We go to the coffee shop and discuss some of the events in Question Time.

4.00 pm There is a new stack of letters and emails to answer in my office.

4.37 pm The division bells ring so I run down the corridor to vote in the House. When I get there, I discover that my party is voting against an amendment. While they count the vote, I sit with a parliamentary colleague who tells me that she is going to have a baby.

5.00 pm Go to a meeting of the back bench committee on trade. I tell the others that a proposed free trade agreement might harm certain businesses in my electorate. The affected business people have been lobbying me and want me to get changes written into the Free Trade Bill.

Evening

6.30 pm I put on my jacket ready for dinner in the Members' Dining Room. I am having a meeting with a group of local government councillors from my electorate who want some additional federal funds for road repairs after last summer's floods. Nice dinner. One of the councillors whispers to me that there is a problem in the local hospital and suggests that I ring the manager and investigate.

7.45 pm I dictate a letter to the Immigration Minister on behalf of a person in my electorate who is having trouble getting a work visa for a family member in Singapore.

9.40 pm In a short speech in the Adjournment Debate I argue for more funding for child day care.

10.10 pm I ring for a car that drives me to the motel in Forrest, where I collapse into bed.

ELECTIONS

The essence of a parliamentary democracy is that citizens elect representatives to make laws on their behalf. General elections are held every three years to elect 150 members of the House of Representatives and 40 senators (half of the 72 state senators plus the four senators representing the two territories). Half-Senate elections are usually held at the same time as elections for the House of Representatives, though they need not be. The most recent separate elections for each house occurred in 1970 (Senate) and 1972 (House of Representatives).



Photo courtesy of AEC

Placing a vote in the ballot box

The Constitution sets out the essential rules for calling general elections. It is compulsory for Australian citizens 18 years and over to vote.

Elections for the House of Representatives use a preferential voting system to elect one member for each electorate. Citizens vote by writing a number beside every name on the ballot paper, '1' for the first preference, '2' for the second preference and so on. If a candidate gains an absolute majority of first preference votes, that candidate wins the seat. If no candidate has enough first preference votes for an absolute majority, then all the preferences are counted. The winner is the candidate who gains an absolute majority of first and later preferences.

Elections for the Senate use a more complex voting system known as proportional representation. Voters have two options: they can simply place the number '1' beside their preferred party, or they can number each candidate in order of their preference. The counting procedure is very complicated—it sometimes takes several weeks to count all the Senate votes. State senators must win a 'quota' of first and later preferences that equals 14.3% of the vote, while territory senators need 33.3% to be elected.

A by-election is held for any seat in the House of Representatives when a sitting member resigns or dies. Senators who resign or die are replaced by a candidate from the same party chosen by the Parliament of the state represented.

Elections are run by the Australian Electoral Commission.

An Act of Parliament called the *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918* sets out the requirements for running Commonwealth elections.

ESTIMATES

Estimates are also known as the Estimates Committees or Senate Estimates, in which senators examine or scrutinise how the government is spending Commonwealth funds. The senators focus on how government funds have been spent recently and on government spending plans for the future. The committees are called 'estimates' because they examine what the government estimates it will collect and spend in the current financial year.

Estimates hearings are held twice a year, usually soon after the government presents its annual budget to the Parliament in May, and then half way through the financial year, in about December. Senate Estimates hearings last for two weeks on both occasions. All hearings are open to the media and the public, and are televised live. There are separate sessions or hearings for each government department and often last several days. Hearings begin at 9 am and continue until 11 pm each day with four committees running simultaneously. Since Estimates are a formal meeting of the Parliament, Hansard records and publishes all statements and debates in the hearings for public information and scrutiny.

Before the public meeting of an Estimates Committee, the panel of senators from all parties scrutinise the budget statements. These are documents that have been presented by the Treasurer to the Parliament in May and contain very detailed lists of all the main items of income and expenditure for the financial year which, in Australia, runs from July to June.

After the senators have studied the Budget documents, there is a formal meeting or hearing of the committee with the minister whose departmental Budget they are scrutinising. The minister is assisted by senior officials from the department. The Senate panel sit along the side of one table, while the minister, flanked by department officials, sits facing the panel at another table.

Senators ask the minister and officials about specific items of income and expenditure, how the programs are being administered, as well as government policy. Only ministers who are senators are required to attend and answer for the government. Senate ministers therefore have to represent ministers who sit in the House of Representatives. In these cases, the Senate minister may not know a great deal about a specific department or portfolio and may rely upon the departmental officials to know all the details of the department's budget.

Estimates proceedings attract great public attention because there are often discussions and disagreements between the Opposition senators on the panel and the minister representing the executive government. Opposition and minor party senators use Estimates to find out more about what they think the government is trying to conceal. Under detailed questioning from non government senators, the government and its department officials often reveal details about government actions that have previously not been made public.

Estimates hearings are a major activity of the Parliament, whose task is to scrutinise and review the work of executive government. Since the government cannot legally spend money without the approval of the Parliament, the Parliament insists that it knows, in detail, about how funds are collected and spent.

PARLIAMENT HOUSE FACTS

The building:

- the Parliament House building was designed by Mitchell/Giurgola and Thorp Architects. This was the winning entry from 329 entries in an international competition to design a new Parliament House
- the selected site covers 32 hectares on Capital Hill
- the first hole in the ground was dug in late 1980, and construction began. The building was officially opened on 9 May 1988, and the first sitting of Parliament was on 22 August 1988
- the building was constructed with 300,000 cubic metres of concrete and 90 percent of materials used are Australian
- the curved walls of the building are surfaced with red granite from Eugowra, about 270 kilometres northwest of Canberra
- the flag mast is 81 metres high and weighs 220 tonnes. The flag is 12.8 metres by 6.4 metres which is about the same size as the side of a double-decker bus, and is possibly the largest Australian flag flying in Australia
- the total cost of the building was \$1.1 billion and is intended to last 200 years.

Inside:

- there are 4,500 rooms with a total area of 250,000 square metres
- the Foyer contains 48 Italian and Portuguese marble clad pillars
- the Great Hall contains a tapestry on the southern wall, and a parquet floor of Western Australian Jarrah with Ebony and Blackbutt inlays. The tapestry was woven in Melbourne and is based on Arthur Boyd's painting of a bush landscape
- the House of Representatives chamber is decorated in the traditional lower house colour of green which has been muted to the colours of Australian eucalypt and acacia trees
- the Senate chamber is decorated in the reds of Australian soils and red gums
- the House of Representatives has 536 seats in the public galleries while the Senate can accommodate 596 people in the galleries
- there are hundreds of other works of art inside the building including rugs, paintings, sculptures and specially designed furniture. Among the many paintings are portraits of previous Prime Ministers, Speakers of the House of Representatives and Presidents of the Senate.



Photo by AUSPIC

Parliament House

HANSARD

Hansard is the written record of what members and senators say in Parliament. A recording is made of all speeches and used to create a printed and web document of everything that has been said including interjections by other members and senators.

The day after a parliamentary sitting or a committee hearing, Hansard publishes a 'proof' copy for checking. Members and senators can offer changes and correct factual mistakes. Some time later, the final version is printed in a volume of one week's debates. Hansard is also published on the Parliament House website.

Hansard is also a written record of parliamentary committee hearings, which are also official meetings of the Parliament. Committee Hansards include all statements made by non parliamentarians who are presenting statements and evidence to the committee.

The term 'Hansard' refers to the printing company that began the printing of the parliamentary debates in England in the late 19th century.

Many people use the Hansard record. Journalists can check on previous speeches by members and senators. Voters can read what their representatives are saying about local issues. Members and senators distribute copies of their speeches to those who are interested.

Hansard is not a legal record of the decisions and actions of the Parliament. The definitive record is called Votes and Proceedings in the House of Representatives and the Journals of the Senate. Nevertheless, Hansard is a reliable and detailed record of the oral work of members and senators.

Members and senators can ask permission of the House or the Senate for additional information such as government statements and public statements on various issues to be included in the Hansard record.

If a second reading speech on a bill has been given in the House of Representatives, it is not repeated in the Senate but merely printed in the Hansard record.

Until recently, speeches were recorded by Hansard reporters writing in shorthand and then typing up a full transcription. The Hansard reporters sit at a separate table in the middle of the House of Representatives or the Senate. Hansard now uses digital recording equipment and the Hansard reporters also record details that the recordings might not pick up.

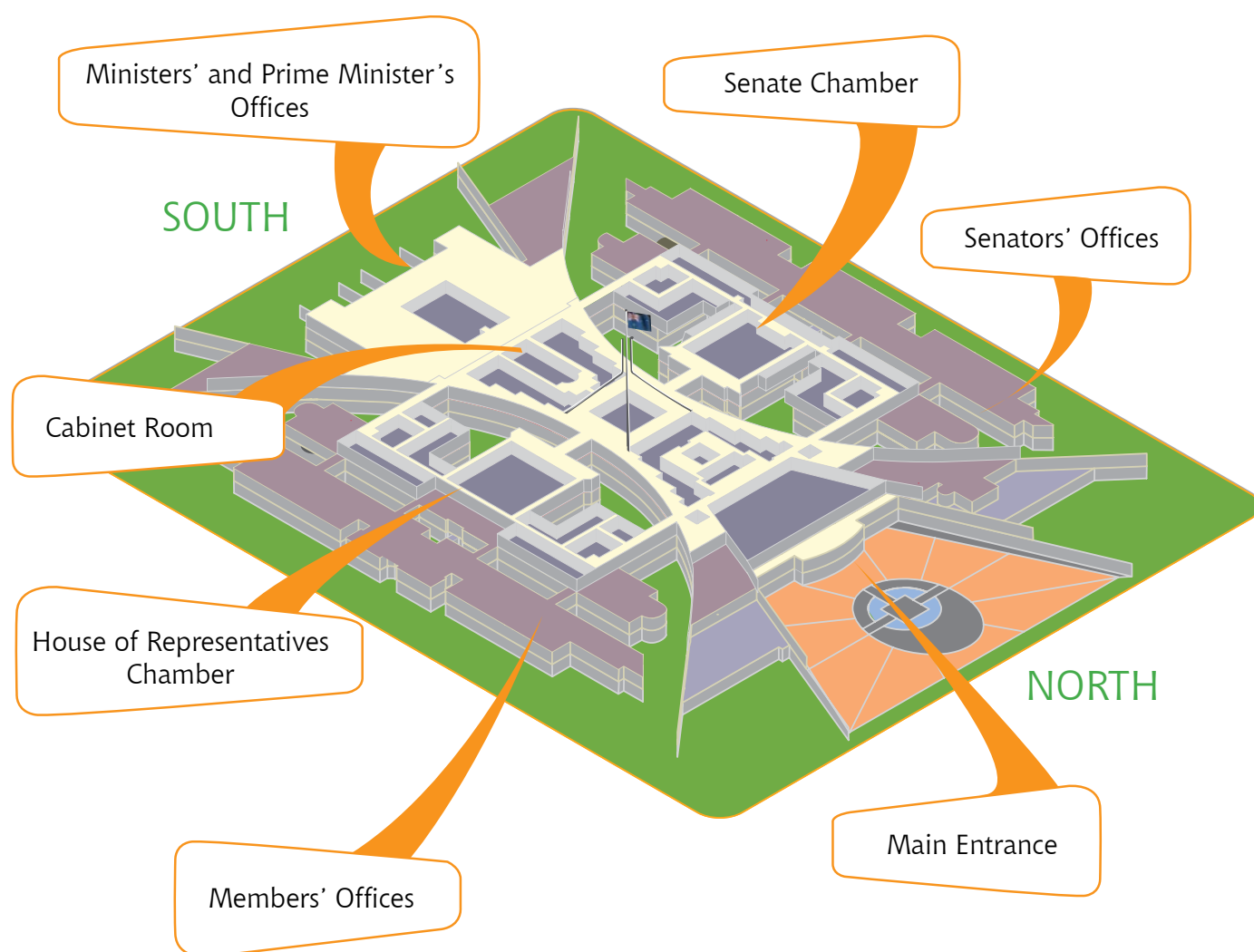


Photo by AUSPIC

Hansard reporters in the House of Representatives

INSIDE PARLIAMENT HOUSE

Canberra, ACT



JOINT SITTING OF PARLIAMENT

A joint sitting of Parliament means that members of the House of Representatives and senators meet together in one chamber. The reason for a joint sitting is to resolve a deadlock between the two chambers of the Parliament. The procedure is described in section 57 of the Australian Constitution.

The Commonwealth Parliament can only make laws when both the House of Representatives and Senate agree with the contents of a bill (a proposed law) and then pass it. Sometimes, one chamber (usually the Senate) rejects or refuses to pass a bill and the two chambers are deadlocked. Section 57 of the Constitution says that in the case of a deadlock, the Governor-General can dissolve the Parliament (known as a double dissolution), and after an election can arrange or convene a joint sitting of both chambers to try to pass the deadlocked bill(s) again. A government would only hold a joint sitting if it was sure that it had a majority of the combined votes to pass the bill or bills that previously had not passed.

The only time in the history of the Commonwealth Parliament that there has been a section 57 joint sitting was in 1974.

In this instance, the Whitlam government had a majority of nine votes in the House of Representatives but not a majority in the Senate. By April 1974, there were a number of bills that the Senate had not passed. To resolve this deadlock, the Prime Minister, Mr Whitlam, requested the Governor-General to use section 57 to dissolve both houses and call an election for 18 May.

The Labor government won the election but with a reduced majority in the House of Representatives. The government still did not have a majority in the Senate. When the Senate rejected the same six bills again, the Governor-General, using section 57 of the Constitution, convened a joint session of both houses on Tuesday 6 and Wednesday 7 August 1974 to vote together on the bills. These were three bills on electoral matters, two regarding health insurance and one to set up the Petroleum and Minerals Authority. All were passed by an absolute majority of members of the House of Representatives and senators voting together.

PRIVATE MEMBERS AND SENATORS

In the House of Representatives a private member is considered to be a member who is not the Speaker, a minister or a parliamentary secretary. More than one third of the sitting time of the House of Representatives is devoted to non-government business, and this includes time for private members' business.

Private members' business is divided into:

- Private members' motions
- Members' Statements
- Petitions
- Grievance debate
- Adjournment debate
- Members' statements in the Main Committee (Second Chamber)
- Budget debate
- Address in reply

Every member of the House has the right to introduce bills. Though private members' bills rarely become laws, the government is sometimes influenced by a private member's bill to introduce a similar bill themselves. Private members' bills more often are introduced to signal publicly matters that members believe need legislative action or to create public debate on an issue.

In the Senate the term General Business is used for all business not conducted by the government.

General business usually consists of:

- Matters of public interest
- Petitions
- Adjournment debates
- Matters of public importance/urgency
- Resolutions of the Senate
- Referrals to committees
- Establishing of committees
- Private senators' bills
- Estimate Committees hearings

In the Senate a private senator's bill is treated in exactly the same way as a government bill.

Between 1901 and 2004 there were 279 private members' bills introduced into parliament, of which 15 were made law.

At any given time there are always private members' and private senators' bills before the parliament, waiting to be debated. For example, at the beginning of the 2005 parliamentary winter recess, 17 senator's bills were before the Senate and six were before the House of Representatives.

MINISTERS

Members and senators who are in the government party or coalition, may be selected to be a minister. The Prime Minister or the party selects ministerial candidates, depending on the tradition of the party. The Prime Minister then allocates members of Parliament to specific portfolios or departments. There are usually about 30 ministers; 20 come from the House of Representatives and 10 from the Senate.

Ministers have three main responsibilities. The first is to run a department such as The Treasury or Foreign Affairs and Trade. If the government or the department needs new legislation on matters connected with the department, the minister makes sure the required legislation is written and passed through Parliament, often seeking expert advice from the department.

Secondly, if the minister wants new legislation for his or her department, the Cabinet has to approve of the idea and then agree with the bill when it is drafted. The Prime Minister may also ask the minister to develop ideas for new policies and bills and present these to Cabinet for discussion.

Thirdly, the minister sits in the Parliament and appears daily in either the House of Representatives or the Senate. All ministers must attend Question Time which lasts for about one hour starting at 2 pm each day. At this time, any member or senator may ask a minister any question about government policy or actions. Ministers bring to Question Time a large folio of information so that questions can be answered with factual details.

When a minister introduces a new bill in the Parliament, he or she outlines the main elements in the bill and the problem that the bill seeks to solve. The minister sits in the chamber during much of the debate on the bill. This is particularly important when bills are complicated or controversial. The minister must be available to the Parliament and be able to answer questions from other members and senators about the bill's details.

Ministers also have ceremonial duties. They welcome important visitors from Australia and overseas. They also represent Australia at international conferences and meetings, and may sign treaties and agreements between the Australian Government and other governments.

PARLIAMENTARY COMMITTEES

Committees are part of the Parliament and are established by the House of Representatives and the Senate to scrutinise bills or investigate issues in greater detail. Often, there is not enough time during debates in the chamber for the members and senators to investigate detailed and complex issues. So they vote to send an issue to one of their committees, which has weeks or even months to make a closer study. Senators often spend more time working in committees than they do debating in the Senate chamber. Each committee has a secretariat to assist with the running of hearings and writing reports.

Parliamentary committees usually have six to ten members and/or senators from both government and opposition parties as well as minor parties in the Senate. One senator or member becomes the chairperson who runs the proceedings.

When Parliament establishes an inquiry it decides the terms of reference or the specific purpose of the inquiry. The committee advertises in newspapers and invites written submissions from the public and experts on the subject.

The committee members read all the submissions and may invite selected people or groups to appear before the committee. Usually some people are invited to appear before the committee in Parliament House. Sometimes the committee travels to different places in Australia so that the members and senators can meet a wide variety of concerned people.

Committee hearings are formal public meetings of the Parliament. Hansard records everything that is said. The media often attend. Submissions and all the hearings are published in Hansard on the Parliament House website. After the public hearings are finished, the committee writes a report which the chairperson formally presents to the Parliament (with the assistance of the secretariat). Members and senators often use evidence from a report to propose amendments to a bill.

There are several types of committees. Most committees consist of senators only or members only, while others are joint committees and include both members and senators. Standing committees are continuous during the life of a parliament and concentrate on examining bills and issues relating to particular subjects. For example, the Senate Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport Committee examines bills and issues about rural affairs.

Select committees are set up by the Parliament to examine a specific issue. When the report is presented, the committee disbands. Often, a minister establishes a committee to investigate a policy issue. In August 2002 for example, the Minister for Foreign Affairs, asked the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade to inquire into Australia's relationship with Indonesia.

Estimates committees meet twice a year to scrutinise how the government has spent the budget funds. The only witnesses who appear before an estimates committee are ministers and senior public servants in government departments.

In recent years, committees have become more and more important in the work of the Parliament, especially since legislation is increasingly more complex and technical such as copyright, digital broadcasting and free trade agreements.

PETITIONS

A petition is a request by a group of citizens for Parliament to take note of and perhaps to solve a particular problem. It is the oldest and main way that citizens can draw attention to or complain directly to the Parliament. Petitions began in the 13th century, although their present form dates from the 17th century.

While there is no fixed or standard form, a petition usually includes:

- an address to the Speaker of the House of Representatives or the President of the Senate
- the power of the Parliament that can be used to solve the problem
- the problems and facts which the petitions want to place before the Parliament
- a request that the Parliament do something in response, and
- a list of the names and addresses of all the petitioners.

Petitions can only be presented to the Parliament by members and senators on behalf of the citizens.

Petitions are presented by members to the House of Representatives on Mondays and by senators to the Senate on Thursdays. About 500 petitions are presented to the Parliament each year.

One of the most famous petitions was presented to the House of Representatives in 1963 by a member on behalf of the Aboriginal people at Yirrkala in the Northern Territory. This petition asked that the Parliament listen to the claims of the people at Yirrkala before land was removed from the Arnhem Land Aboriginal Reserve. As a result, the Parliament established a select committee to investigate the issue. This petition was written in English and Yolgnu, the Yirrkala language, and decorated with Aboriginal illustrations. The petition is on public display in Parliament House.



Image reproduced courtesy of the Department of the House of Representatives and the Yirrkala Community.

Part of the Yirrkala Petition

PREPARING A BILL FOR PARLIAMENT

One of the main responsibilities of ministers and the government is to prepare bills for submission to Parliament. This process may be complex and take a long time.

The process often begins in a Cabinet meeting where the government decides to solve a specific problem with a piece of legislation in the form of a bill. The Cabinet of a newly elected government also has a number of election promises to fulfil. Cabinet has to decide when and how the new policies will be introduced. These election promises may lead to bills being proposed.

Once the Cabinet agrees to do something, the relevant minister then follows a procedure for preparing and introducing bills into Parliament. There are many stages in the process. The main stages are set out below.

1. Cabinet agrees to a proposal and the minister directs the department to write what the Cabinet wants in the new bill (drafting instructions).
2. The drafting instructions may include ideas from a party committee made up of backbenchers, as well as ideas from a parliamentary committee of inquiry that has already reported its recommendations to the Parliament.
3. The department sends the drafting instructions to the Office of Parliamentary Counsel.
4. Parliamentary Counsel employs lawyers who specialise in writing or drafting bills. They write the draft bill and return it to the department and the minister.
5. The department checks the draft. Other departments that might be affected also scrutinise the draft. Often a party committee reads the draft bill to check agreement with party policy.
6. The bill is refined and the minister presents a final version to Cabinet for approval.
7. Once Cabinet has made any changes and approved the final version, Parliamentary Counsel prints the final version and delivers all the copies to Parliament House.
8. Staff in the department who assisted in the drafting of the bill write two documents. The first is the explanatory memorandum which outlines the sources, intention and main provisions of the bill that may not be clearly understood. The department also writes the speech for the Minister which he or she reads to the Parliament when the bill is introduced.
9. The government schedules the bill to appear on the House or Senate agenda.
10. The minister stands up in Parliament and presents both the bill and the Explanatory Memorandum to the Parliament and gives a copy of both to the Clerk. Copies of the bill are then distributed to all members or senators, and the bill is now public. The minister then moves that the bill be read a second time and then proceeds to read the second reading speech.

The bill then continues its passage through the Parliament, which might take days, weeks or even months.

STANDING ORDERS

Three sets of laws and rules determine how Parliament works: the Constitution, the standing orders and conventions established in previous parliaments. While the Constitution refers to both the House of Representatives and the Senate, each House has its own standing orders, and its own conventions and traditions.

Standing orders is the rule book for the daily running of Parliament. The Constitution (Section 50) gives to the members of each House the power to establish and change their own standing orders. A committee of the House of Representatives revised and up-dated the standing orders of that chamber in 2004.

Standing orders refers to such things as:

- how the Speaker and the President are elected
- debating rules
- what is disorderly behaviour by Members and Senators, and
- how votes are organised.

One example of a standing order is number 97 which says:

97 Daily Question Time

(a) Question Time shall begin at 2 pm on Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday, at which time the Speaker shall interrupt any business before the House and call on questions without notice.

If members or senators wish to disagree with how the Speaker or the President is running a debate or making a decision, they can stand up and draw a specific standing order to the attention of the person in the chair. The chair then has to interpret the point of order, sometimes with the assistance of the Clerk, who has a detailed knowledge of the standing orders.

Standing orders change over time. The Parliament can vote to change any standing order. The House of Representatives recently made a thorough revision of its standing orders in which it changed the language, the rules themselves and the way the rules are organised.

THE BUDGET

The budget is the government's annual statement of income and expenditure. Section 81 in the Constitution says that all monies collected by the Commonwealth must be paid into the Consolidated Revenue Fund. Section 83 of the Constitution says that money in this fund can only be spent with the agreement of the Parliament. While the executive government collects and spends the money, the Parliament has ultimate responsibility for government finances, and collection and expenditure only occurs with the agreement of the Parliament.

The budget is a collection of financial documents. The main documents detail:

- the government's assessment of the national economy
- the government's priorities and policies for the coming year
- how the government intends to raise money (taxes)
- how much money is expected to be raised
- how the government intends to spend this money, and
- the specific allocation of funds to departments and programs.

The budget documents are prepared and presented to the Parliament by the Treasurer and the department of Treasury. They begin the process early each year. The Treasurer works with the other Cabinet members to develop the spending policies, priorities and amounts for each department of the government. The Cabinet finally approves the budget which is then introduced into the House of Representatives by the Treasurer in May each year. The budget bills are called Appropriation Bills (No 1) and (No 2). There are other bills as well.

Members and senators debate, scrutinise and eventually pass the bills. The Senate also scrutinises the budget later in estimates committees. Senate estimates committees scrutinise the ministers and senior public servants in each department to investigate how government funds have been collected and spent. This happens twice each year, usually in June and December.

The figures overleaf show some of the sources of government income and a few of the many ways in which the government spends its money. These figures are for 2003–2004.

Government revenues

Direct taxes

- \$142 billion (includes personal income tax \$98.7 billion, company tax \$36.3 billion)

Indirect taxes

- \$27.6 billion (includes customs duties \$5.6 billion, fuel excise \$13.5 billion)

Total income \$187.6 billion

Government expenses

The government spends money on many things but the major expenses are for a few departments with big programs. These include:

- Twice a year, the Parliament scrutinises how the government has spent these funds.
- Defence \$12.9 billion
- Education \$13.3 billion
- Health \$31.7 billion
- Social Security \$80.1 billion

Total expenses \$181 billion

The government also collects \$34.1 billion of GST funds which are handed over directly to the States and territories in the following amounts:

ACT	\$0.6 billion	SA	\$3.1 billion
NSW	\$9.6 billion	TAS	\$1.3 billion
NT	\$1.6 billion	VIC	\$6.9 billion
QLD	\$6.5 billion	WA	\$3.1 billion

The states and territories receive a major part of their income from the Australian Government. For example, in 2004–2005 the New South Wales government planned to receive \$15.7 billion or about half its total income of \$38.5 billion from the Commonwealth. \$9.7 billion of this grant came from the GST which is collected by the Commonwealth on behalf of all the states and territories.

THE CLERK

Both the House of Representatives and the Senate each have a Clerk (pronounced 'clark') who is the chief parliamentary official who sits in front of the Speaker of the House and the President of the Senate. The Clerks are career officials and are not elected members or senators. The Clerk is the only non elected person in the chamber who is allowed to speak when the Parliament is sitting.

The Clerk has two main areas of work. The first is the responsibility of assisting the Speaker or the President (the presiding officers) to run the Parliament in each chamber. The Clerk must know all the rules and conventions of the Parliament and be able to assist members and senators in the day to day running of parliamentary business.

The Clerk helps organise the day's order of business together with the presiding officers and the senior members and senators. During the day's proceedings, the Clerk listens to the debates and makes sure that all the actions of the Parliament are legal and accurately recorded. The Clerk also records all the decisions of the Parliament in a daily publication called Votes and Proceedings for the House of Representatives and Journals for the Senate.

The second task of the Clerk is to run a department of more than 200 parliamentary staff in the Department of the House of Representatives or the Department of the Senate. These departments organise the daily operations of the Parliament, and assist members and senators.

Each chamber also has a deputy clerk and several clerk assistants who share the work and take turns to sit at the centre table.

The word 'clerk' means someone who can read and write. The first clerk was appointed to the English Parliament in 1363 because most parliamentarians were illiterate. The clerk read the title and contents of bills so that everyone knew what they were debating. Clerks still stand and read aloud the title of each bill.



Photo by AUSPIC

The Speaker and the Clerks of the House of Representatives

THREE LEVELS OF GOVERNMENT

Australia is a federation and power is shared between three levels of government.

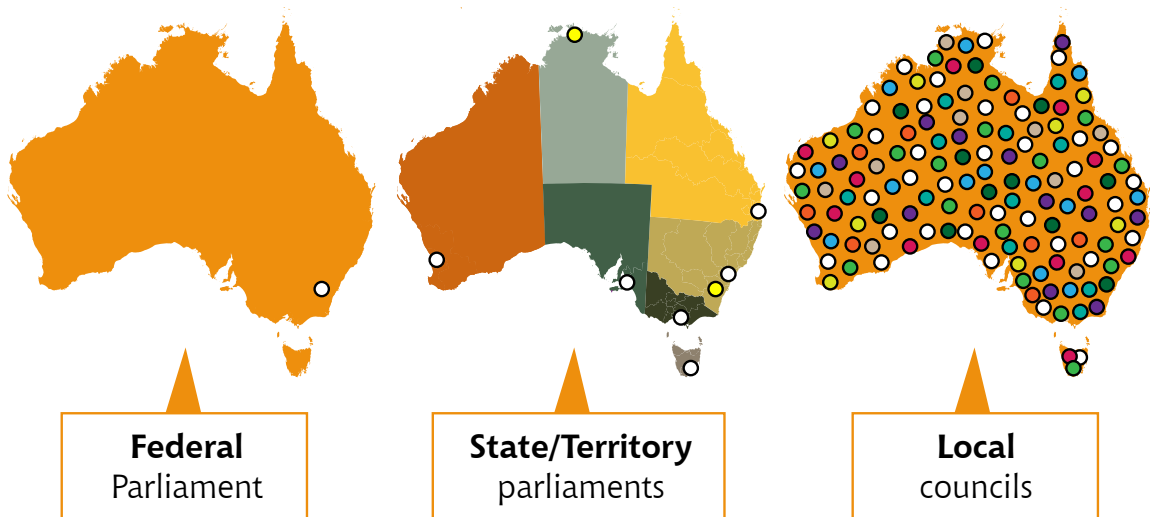
Each level of government is run by a democratically elected council or parliament. These councils and parliaments have power to collect taxes to pay for their own programs although funds are transferred from the Commonwealth to the states, territories and local governments. States also fund local council activities.

The powers of the Commonwealth are listed in section 51 of the Constitution and include defence, foreign affairs, trade and immigration. State powers include almost everything that the states did not give to the Commonwealth when the federation was formed in 1901 and include health, education, transport, agriculture and forests.

Local government powers are defined by Acts of Parliament in each state, and include building regulations, waste management, recreation spaces and dog control.

The three levels share powers over some things such as roads, environmental management and public health issues.

LAW-MAKING BODIES IN AUSTRALIA



WHERE BILLS COME FROM

One of Parliament's main tasks is to debate and create new laws or bills. Bills are created to solve specific problems in the Australian community. Each year, hundreds of people and organisations request and suggest new laws to answer problems they are facing.

Government departments make many suggestions. Departments advise their minister about existing and new problems that require a specific law.

Often, community groups, businesses or lobby groups approach ministers with requests and suggestions for particular bills.

Sometimes a debate in the community will suggest new ideas for a bill.

Political parties suggest new laws, especially after an election when they want to implement their new policies.

Sometimes a minister sets up a parliamentary committee of inquiry to examine a current issue. The minister and the government may decide as a result that further action is necessary and a new law is created.

Each week, Parliament reserves a time for any non-government member or senator to introduce their own bill, called a private member's bill. These bills contain ideas which come from non-government political parties or citizens in the electorates of members and the states of senators.

GOVERNMENT

In general the word government can refer to:

- the system of rules used within a country or community (for example, Australia has a democratic system of government)
- the leading decision-making group within a country or community
- the people who form the executive who are responsible for deciding on national strategies.

This fact sheet focuses on the leading decision-making group within the federal Parliament.

Forming government

In Australia, the federal government is selected from and also a part of the federal Parliament. At a federal election, the party or coalition with a majority of members elected to the House of Representatives becomes the government. This is why the House of Representatives is sometimes called the 'House of Government'.

If no political party or coalition achieves a majority in the House of Representatives at a federal election, the result is sometimes called a 'hung parliament'. However, it is still possible for a government to be formed if a majority can be achieved through agreement with Independent and/or minor party members. This type of government is known as a 'minority government'.

To remain in government, a party or coalition must maintain the support of the majority of members of the House of Representatives. This is called the principle of responsible government. It ensures that the government is accountable to the Parliament. In Australia the principle of responsible government works together with the principal of separation of powers to guide the way in which law is made and managed. See the Separation of Powers fact sheet for more information. Although government is formed in the House of Representatives, there are also members of the government in the Senate. In the Senate, the government may or may not hold the majority of seats.

Government responsibilities

The responsibilities of the federal government include:

- Making important decisions on behalf of Australians (eg. whether or not to send Australian troops to war zones).
- Developing policy (eg. the ideas and plans for managing trade, foreign affairs, environment, health and education).
- Introducing ideas for new laws, or changes to old ones, to the Parliament (eg. the Carbon Pollution Reduction Scheme Bill 2010).
- Implementing laws passed by the Parliament, through government departments (eg. the Department of Immigration and Citizenship implements immigration law).
- Representing Australia overseas (eg. through key spokespeople such as the Prime Minister and the Minister for Foreign Affairs).

Government Leadership

The leader of the government is the Prime Minister, and traditionally sits in the House of Representatives. There is also a head of government in the Senate called the Leader of the Government in the Senate.

Some government members of parliament are selected to be ministers. Ministers are responsible for looking after a particular area of government, also called a 'portfolio'. Ministers work with their corresponding government department to develop policies and implement laws passed by the Parliament. For example the Minister for Defence works with the Department of Defence to implement laws about defence matters.

Together the Prime Minister and selected ministers make up the Cabinet or Executive Government. The Cabinet has a particularly important role in leading the government; see the Cabinet fact sheet for more information.

INDEX

- A Day in the Life of a Member of the House of Representatives 40
- A Day in Parliament 27
- Adjournment Debate 05
- Amendments 06
- Bills and Acts 28
- Budget 53
- Cabinet 19
- Clerk 54
- Coalition (See Political Parties 22)
- Coat of Arms 01
- Constitution 31
- Crossing the Floor 38
- Despatch Box 02
- Double Dissolution 33
- Elections 41
- Estimates 42
- Federation 34
- Frontbenchers and Backbenchers 37
- Functions of Parliament 29
- Governor-General 17
- Government 57
- Hansard 44
- House of Representatives 18
- Independent Members and Senators 14
- Inside parliament house 45
- Joint Sitting of Parliament 46
- Leader of the Opposition 15
- Mace 11
- Main Committee 08
- Media 24
- Members of Parliament in the House of Representatives 20
- Ministers 48
- Ministers and Shadow Ministers 21
- Parliament House Facts 43
- Parliamentary Committees 49
- Party leadership in the Senate and the House of Representatives 07
- Party Meetings (See Political Parties 22)
- Party Whip 26
- Passing a bill 36
- Petitions 50
- Political Party 22
- Preparing a Bill for Parliament 51
- President of the Senate 16
- Prime Minister 23
- Private Members and Senators 47
- Prorogation & Dissolution 13
- Question Time 39
- Senate 25
- Senators 32
- Separation of powers 35
- Serjeant-at-Arms 10
- Speaker 30
- Speaker's Chair 03
- Standing Orders 52
- Three Levels of Government 55
- Usher of the Black Rod 04
- Where Bills Come From 56